From the Guest Editor: Arrangement and Description of Archives

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It might be argued that arrangement and description is something of a poor child in the competition for attention in these pages. Although the journal has published several articles on arrangement and description over the years, this issue is the first one to be wholly devoted to the subject. There have been two special issues on electronic records. Other issues in recent years have paid particular attention to such subjects as the history of records and archives, archives and culture, archives and photography, queer archives, archives and the law, and archives: space and power. The archival function of appraisal, which one suspects is widely regarded (falsely, I think) as more intellectually challenging than the function of identifying and representing archives, has regularly been the subject of articles in recent years. This relative neglect of arrangement and description is unfortunate, for many of the threads of thinking about archives in the digital age and about connecting archival science with wider currents of thought in other disciplines ought to be brought to bear on consideration of arrangement and description, which is what this issue aims to do.

We open with Richard Dancy's searching examination of the birth, life, and shortcomings of the Canadian *Rules for Archival Description (RAD)*. He begins with the history of the making of *RAD* and efforts to reform it, all in the light of international developments. He then judiciously and persuasively presents the case that the existing structure of *RAD* inhibits making necessary reforms, offers a wide-ranging analysis of where rules are lacking, and canvasses three possible ways to make needed improvements. In his conclusion, he observes that "more than anything else, what is needed now is a period of debate in which the Canadian archival community begins to look critically at its standard. Part of the difficulty *RAD2* faced was that it provided answers to questions very few Canadian archivists were asking. *RAD* is a community standard: it does not need fixing if the community does not perceive anything wrong with it." It is difficult to believe that discerning readers of his article will think there is nothing wrong with *RAD*, but easy to believe that realizing reform necessitates overcoming some serious hurdles.

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First, there needs to be consensus behind the rationale for reform. Second, there needs to be support for the actual effort at reform. *RAD* came about because there was widespread support for development of descriptive standards: the benefits were understood and the archival community stood up to bear the costs of its development and implementation. Assuming the community answers the bell Dancy has rung to reach a consensus on the wisdom of reforming *RAD*, the questions are the same: are the benefits of reform worth the effort and is the community willing to accept the cost of developing and implementing a revised set of rules? I think that it should be. Much that was swept under the rug when *RAD* was devised needs to be dealt with. It only needs the community to galvanize itself again to take the next step in the development of its linchpin descriptive standard.

In his article in this issue, Geoffrey Yeo extends the far-ranging and deep-reaching exploration of fundamental concepts at the heart of archival theory, and therefore the complex process of arranging and describing archives, that he developed in several previous articles. He makes the case for more subtlety in our appreciation of the character of various archival aggregations, which he believes have never been easy to fix (that is, identify in one way) and are even less so in the digital age. In keeping with recent constructivist-oriented thinking to the effect that archives are formed and re-formed and never explicable from only one viewpoint, he challenges the traditional distinction between collections and fonds. His challenge opens up several avenues for rethinking how archivists approach arrangement and description. Above all, he joins other voices in calling for "third order" multi-view representations of archives in relational models. He presents a rich vein of ideas that strongly suggest that reform of arrangement and description is likely to look both conceptually and practically more like a revolution. It certainly suggests that the great leap forward that *RAD* appeared to be twenty years ago in Canada now looks more like a baby step. Despite its structural flaws, which Dancy dissects, *RAD* was based on well-established concepts of traditional archival science. Yeo's thinking strongly suggests that any true leap forward that capitalizes on the capacities of the digital era must call upon and employ knowledge beyond our own ken to build approaches to arrangement and description robust enough to open avenues to the hitherto unexploited richness of institutional holdings.

Robin Darwall-Smith and Michael Riordan take us back to an earlier era and the history of the first efforts to arrange and describe the archives of eight Oxford colleges. "Why this article in this issue?" readers might ask. Well, for one, every institutional collection presents layer upon layer of past practice with which current practice must wrestle. (There is, by the way, a rich vein of research to track just how materials were marked by institutional work on them, and how such marking might be exposed for greater understanding of what the researcher confronts.) For another, the authors make it abundantly clear that departure from concepts of respect des fonds and respect for original

order at least obscured, and possibly destroyed, our ability to detect important relationships of records and aggregations, and thereby give heartening notice that, for all the prodding we give traditional concepts, they do provide a reasoned basis for the treatment of archives, which can be overturned only at peril. Darwall-Smith and Riordan's story is an interesting one for its own sake as a piece of archival history, but they use it to reflect on current policies and practices in which they see a trend toward privileging content over context once again, as was the motivation for the work of the early cataloguers of the Oxford college archives they have studied.

Andrew Janes details the situation of cartographic records (maps) in The National Archives (TNA) of the United Kingdom and explains how long-standing practices of identifying and describing them were reformed to align with archival descriptive standards, to incorporate them into the institutional project to computerize all descriptions, and to improve on existing descriptions and access to the vast holdings of maps in the institution. He explains in considerable detail how TNA addressed a broad range of issues in the process of modernizing its arrangement and description (the term he uses is cataloguing) of cartographic records. In telling the story of all this work, he aims (and succeeds admirably) to bring the work on cartographic records from the margins of archival science into the mainstream. (By the way, it is difficult not to reflect that the decision to keep separate chapters for the likes of cartographic records in *RAD*, about which Dancy writes at some length, can only have had the opposite effect.) One suspects that other institutions have gone through a similar process of rethinking and reformulating practice for description of cartographic records, but if they have, none have been reported; and if they have not, Janes's work here provides an ample picture of how to go about it. Nevertheless, I would like to think that non-specialists with cartographic records can read this article with profit. If cartographic records and consideration of the special concerns of their treatment exist on the margins of archival science, perhaps it is because they are not widely understood in the community.

Jane Zhang reports on her research about the extent to which the concept of original order is observed in three institutions that are preserving born-digital archival materials. Among other questions, she asks how original order is established in digital archives and how documentary relationships can be identified and preserved. She then answers those questions as they are addressed in the actual programs of digital preservation she has studied. Her answer is distilled into six key findings. Although she does not put it this way, her conclusion is that, however access to individual archival documents may be provided, archivists depend on the order and relationships of digital archives while preserving them, and researchers will benefit from their identification and representation. In many ways, hers is a heartening story of how fundamental ideas have been tested and confirmed in the new digital environment.

Finally, Carolyn Harris reports on the challenges of applying the concept of original order in the arrangement and description of the Donald G. Simpson Fonds at York University, Toronto. Much has been written in a conceptual vein about the changing face of archives as they pass through various stages in their existence, and how these transformations need to be documented. Harris's is an account of how complicated it can become to represent order and how open to question the notion of "original" order is when the creator has actively intervened to present his archives, and the archivist must struggle to represent its character to the world.

In one way or another, all these authors dig beneath the surface of traditional thinking about arrangement and description, and present a picture of the complexity of both observing cardinal precepts of the profession and applying them in creative ways to meet the reality archivists encounter. In so doing, they have admirably fulfilled the aim for this special issue.